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Rogers Angrily Hits Back At Democrats on Mining

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

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WASHINGTON, May 15—Secretary of State William P. Rogers, his voice rising in anger, today defended the mining of North Vietnam's harbors and said that if the Johnson Administration had taken the step earlier, the war might have ended long ago.

In a sharp, highly political exchange with Senator William Proxmire, Democrat of Wisconsin, Mr. Rogers said that the Administration was confident that the President's latest moves would not lead to a showdown with either the Russians or the Chinese. The moves, he said, might lead to a negotiated settlement with the North Vietnamese.

Meanwhile the Pentagon disclosed that the mined waterways in North Vietnam included rivers and canals. [Page 14.]

Secretary Rogers, testifying before Mr. Proxmire's foreign operations subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee, was clearly leading an Administration counterattack against Democrats who had criticized the mine-laying as an act of brinkmanship. Two more Cabinet members joined in the counterattack today.

Mr. Rogers said that the American people had "overwhelmingly" supported Mr. Nixon's moves and that members of Congress should rally around the President and put off criticism "until the campaign begins."

In a quick rejoinder, Mr. Proxmire, who has opposed the bombing of North Vietnam, said that he would be "remiss in his duties" if he did not attack the latest moves.

Two other Cabinet officers, who have rarely spoken out on current foreign policy issues, also joined in the attack on Democrats today.

Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz, in a speech to the American Advertising Federation here, said that domestic criticism of Mr. Nixon should be halted for several weeks. He likened the situation in Vietnam to the Cuban missile crisis

in 1962 during the Kennedy Administration. "This is the time we must stand behind our President," he said.

Understand 'Naked Power'

Referring to his recent trip to Moscow, Dr. Butz said that the Russians "understand the language of naked power—the kind of language President Nixon is now speaking."

The Secretary of the Interior, Rogers C. B. Morton, in a speech prepared for delivery to the Republican Boosters Club in New York, said that "in contrast to the majority of Americans, most Democrats in the Congress have not supported the President." He went on, "I am saddened by the vicious partisan reaction of those who should know better."

Mr. Proxmire, in questioning Mr. Rogers, said that he was encouraged by the latest battlefield developments in South Vietnam, but asked why it was necessary for the President to take the extraordinary action "that could cause a confrontation with the Soviet Union and ships of other countries—an action which was resisted by the other Administration?"

Mr. Rogers, who called Mr. Nixon's speech last Monday, in which the mining and other moves were announced, one of the "great statements" of the war, said that Mr. Proxmire's statement was not logical. He said: "If the other Administration took this action, the war would not have lasted as long as it has."

"The logic is faulty," Mr. Rogers said. "People who made mistake after mistake said it was wrong," he continued, rejecting the premise that because the Democratic Administration had decided not to mine harbors Mr. Nixon should have done the same.

'Probably a Turning Point'

He said that "predictions of catastrophe are not coming to pass." The latest Nixon war moves "may well lead to the failure of the invasion of the South and the other side may negotiate a settlement," Mr. Rogers asserted. "I don't believe it is a mistake and don't believe it will lead to a confrontation. It's probably a turning point."

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Mr. Proxmire or by the two other Senators at the hearing, Hawaii, and Mark O. Hatfield, Republican of Oregon, why the Nixon Administration had not mined the harbors sooner if such action held out the prospect of ending the war more quickly.

The secret Defense Department history of the Vietnam war through 1968—the Pentagon papers—contained several references to discussions in the Johnson Administration on mining the North Vietnamese harbors.

In the years that such strategy was discussed, from 1966 to 1968, the Johnson Administration rejected the proposal out of fear that it might provoke direct Soviet or Chinese intervention in the war on the side of the North Vietnamese.

As a memorandum in 1967 by Robert S. McNamara, the Defense Secretary, indicated, the Administration was concerned that Hanoi would fall increasingly under Peking's influence if it had to rely increasingly on rail shipments. At that time, the Administration believed that Peking was the most belligerent Communist power and might intensify the war.

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Henry A. Kissinger, the President's adviser on national security, sought advice from various Government agencies at the start of the Nixon Administration and received conflicting views.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department to a limited extent believed that mining of the harbors, in conjunction with heavy bombing raids, could hurt North Vietnam significantly. But the Central Intelligence Agency generally opposed such an action. The views were included in National Security Study Memorandum 11, which recently became public.

Last week Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger said that the decision to lay the mines was the only alternative left to the United States to keep South Vietnam from being defeated. And last week, when it was not known if the action would lead to a showdown with the Soviet Union, Administration officials were much less outspoken than Mr. Rogers was today.

In his testimony, Mr. Rogers also said Vietnamization was working well in South Vietnam and that the South Vietnamese would be able to defend their country. But Mr. Proxmire took issue on both counts. He said that the heavy use of American sea and air power proved the contrary, and that he remained dubious that the South Vietnamese could turn back the North Vietnamese.